

CLOUDS IN THE NATION'S SKY.

A

DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

CHURCHES OF NORTH ADAMS,

AT A

UNION SERVICE HELD IN THE BAPTIST CHURCH,

ON THE DAY OF THE

ANNUAL STATE THANKSGIVING, Nov. 25, 1858.

BY

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CORRESPONDENCE.

North Adams, Dec. 1, 1858.

REV. ALBERT PAINE:

DEAR SIR:—The undersigned having listened with much pleasure and profit to the Sermon delivered by you on Thanksgiving Day, and believing its sentiments eminently calculated to do good, respectfully solicit a copy for publication.

Very truly your obedient servants,

E. S. HAWKS,
E. ROGERS,
CHAS. R. LITTLEFIELD,
R. H. DUTTON,
H. C. STEEVER,
AUSTIN MAGEE.

GENTLEMEN:

The Sermon you refer to, was prepared for the occasion on which it was preached and with no thought of any further use. I am gratified at the assurance that you listened to it with pleasure and profit, and if its publication can in any degree effect that good which in your partial judgment it is calculated to effect, I shall rejoice and thank God for His use of so humble an agency. Would that merely *pointing at* dark National clouds sufficed to scatter them.

The discourse is submitted to your disposal and commended to the blessing of God.

Yours respectfully,

ALBERT PAINE.

DR. E. S. HAWKS, AND OTHERS.

North Adams, Dec. 8, 1858.

SERMON.

"THE NATION AND KINGDOM THAT WILL NOT SERVE THEE SHALL PERISH;
YEA, THOSE NATIONS SHALL BE UTTERLY WASTED."—Isaiah LX: 12.

The occasion which has convened us is a civil festival of gratitude and praise to our Heavenly Father. It is appropriate to-day to recall to our minds the blessings we have enjoyed during the past year, to acknowledge the source whence we received them and to thank Him who gave them. If we will each review our individual history for the year past, and carefully note all the kind acts of our Heavenly Benefactor toward us, nothing, I am sure, but a thankless spirit can wholly repress a gush of grateful emotion.

This is also a fit occasion to make mention of the Divine goodness to us in our social relations. Domestic tranquillity, fire-side happiness—so important ingredients of human enjoyment—demand of us a thankful recognition.

Especially is it appropriate on a thanksgiving festival appointed by our civil authorities, to give thanks for our civil privileges. The Governor's proclamation is addressed to us as citizens. We meet as citizens—to give thanks to God for the blessings of citizenship in a free and happy land.

Scarcely any other earthly blessing is to be compared to that of good government. The reason is, that this is the necessary condition of nearly all others. The province of civil government is to protect men's natural rights. Trample on these; let life, personal liberty, property, reputation be at the mercy of the lawless and the malicious and there is an end to all earthly happiness. Good government is beyond price, because without it, domestic peace and happiness could not exist, labor would have no assurance of its just reward, and violence and oppression would know no restraint. If there be value in personal security, in liberty of conscience,

in domestic tranquillity and in the undisturbed pursuit of innocent happiness, then is there value in good civil government, for the latter is the indispensable condition of the former. Thank God, *we* have such a government. Our country is a happy country; happy, I do not mean, in comparison with a paradise, for crime and poverty and wretchedness are by no means unknown among us; but ours is a happy nation compared with other nations. The natural rights of the mass of the people are better protected, labor is better rewarded, and men are in a better situation to feel a just self-respect, and the true dignity of their nature. Our theory has been, that the government is made for the people, not the people for the government. The government of most nations has been a yoke upon the necks of the people, rather than their protection and defense. It may seem strange that civil government, an institution of Divine appointment (for the powers that be are ordained of God) and designed to protect and bless society, should have been so universally perverted. But the history of the world puts the fact beyond dispute. Civil government has very generally been an implement of tyranny, a galling chain upon the necks of men, rather than their bulwark of defense. Our beloved America has been an exception. God hath not dealt so with any other nation. He hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad. For what we have enjoyed, let us to-day sincerely thank him.

But while giving thanks for a favor, it is natural to feel some solicitude at a possibility of losing it. Where such a possibility is perceived, our very gratitude will almost unavoidably wear a tinge of melancholy solicitude. It is not, therefore, an unnatural transition, to pass from causes for gratitude to co-existing causes for solicitude. Let me then turn your attention to some of the occasions for solicitude which must force themselves upon the notice of a close observer of our national affairs. And in pointing our finger toward some of the black clouds that seem to float in our national sky, we would not do it in the tone of those Europeans who are forever disparaging every thing American, and prognosticating our downfall; nor would we be of the number of those over-timorous mortals among ourselves, who at once give a solemn shake of the head at any allusion to our country's probable destiny; the sort of men who can not even sleep composedly, for fear that in some unexpected moment, the sky will be down upon them. With these incessant croakers of evil to our republic, we prefer not to be classed. *We will hope.* But while hoping, we would not be thoughtlessly confident. The prudent man, by foreseeing evil, manages to hide

himself. Our future destiny is veiled in uncertainty, and it is foolish to pretend otherwise. All human governments are mutable and destructible, and ours is a human government. Depraved human nature is a bad thing to govern. It is ever restless under restraint, and before a paroxysm of depravity the restraints of civil government are but bands of tow.

Our nation is a republic, both in form, and spirit; and republicanism, be it known, has dangers peculiar to itself. With us, the political power is lodged with the people. It is not a mere figure of speech, to say that the people are the sovereigns.—Royal edicts have no more potency, nor majesty than the aggregate of their individual suffrages. The moment you arm a man with power, you make him and his movements of some consequence. When you see a weapon in a man's hands, it becomes quite a significant question, "What is he going to do with it?" The disposition, the intention of the man, *then* becomes a much more serious matter than when you saw him unarmed. Grind a man to the dust, take away all his political rights, make him the mere foot-licker of royalty, and though you may lament his degradation, you need not be in much fear that he will do mischief. He is too degraded and impotent for that, even though he might have a mischief-making disposition.

In a republic, ignorance and vice, and a spirit of lawlessness among the mass of the people, are far more destructive and suicidal than in an aristocratic or monarchical government. The reason is, that this ignorance and vice and lawlessness can wield political power. The power which our people delegate to their representatives reverts into their own hands at stated periods. The people thus have it in their power, at regular intervals, to reach forth their hand and turn the helm of government whithersoever they list. Our delegates to Congress therefore cannot long misrepresent their constituents. Our government will be what the people choose to make it. Our representatives will, as a general thing, reflect the spirit and character of the people who send them. The exhibitions of bullying chivalry, which have now and then taken place on the floor of our Congress, have been enacted by those who learned to play the bully at home. The dirks and bowie-knives that have a place in the pockets of certain of our Congressmen, (though not always kept in their *pockets*) are generally manufactured among their constituents, and are only a part of their official outfit. If our citizens are corrupt, their representatives will be corrupt, and our government will become rotten to its core. In a republic,

the morals of the government are only an index and embodiment of the morals of the people. Hence, there cannot be, from the nature of the case, a conservative, balancing force in the government to oppose and counteract the baneful effects of immorality and profligacy among the people.

In monarchies and aristocracies the case is otherwise. The power that yields their government, is above and beyond the reach of the people. What if the lower classes among them are ignorant and vicious? The effects of their ignorance and vice be upon their own heads; the government of the nation is comparatively unaffected by it. A conservative influence may be wielded by the crown or the aristocracy to counteract the destructive consequences of degeneracy among the people. *We* have no such safeguard. Our President and Congress are the creation of the people; and the people will be sure to create them after their own moral likeness. We have no safeguard but our own moral elevation. Popular ignorance and degradation are pre-eminently disastrous in a republic. A degraded populace in a monarchy is on some accounts convenient,—it makes good timber for a royal footstool. Thrones need some substratum of this kind in order to stand securely, for the more ignorant you can keep men, the better contented will they be under oppression, and the more obedient tools of despots. But in a republic, popular ignorance is an element of danger. As long as ignorance remains a political cypher, as in aristocratic governments, it is rather to be pitied than feared. But let it become a power in the State, let it control the government through its exercise of the elective franchise, place in its hand the rudder of a nation's destiny and you have a blind Sampson hold of the political pillars. As long as blindness does not attempt to do a work which requires good eyes, it will not be very apt to hurt others; but as soon as it undertakes to turn pilot, it will be likely to shipwreck multitudes besides itself. So ignorance undertaking to do things that require and pre-suppose intelligence, attempting to wield political power, is a just object of fear to every friend of his country.

It is in this view that the few restrictions upon the right of suffrage in our country furnish just ground of apprehension.—How far this right ought to be restricted. I will not attempt to decide. It is a point on which our statesmen are not unanimous. Whatever a sound policy might dictate, one thing seems undeniable. The general current of opinions and events in our nation seems to favor a very extended, rather than a restricted right of suffrage. Whatever ought to be the case, it seems to be settled that the res-

possibilities, the *high* responsibilities of the elective franchise are to be entrusted with scarcely a restriction, but that of age and sex, (if in these times of reform the latter should chance to continue to be a ground of restriction); with scarcely a restriction, I say, the responsibilities of the elective franchise are destined in our country to be entrusted to almost every *thing* that has a human form. Men of every degree of intellectual and moral elevation, and many of no degree—beings of every kindred and tribe under heaven, and from every shore, (that of Africa being always excepted), seem destined, in most of our States, to have a voice in the government. I say, the signs of the times indicate that we are to have but few limitations to the elective franchise. The party that dares insinuate the propriety of a change in the naturalization-laws, if it would avoid defeat, had better at once retract the insinuation.

Such being the tendency of things, and such the prospect before us, our duty, our policy is plain. The alternative before us is to be ruled by ignorance and almost brutish degradation, or to enlighten and elevate it. The strong motives of self-interest, therefore; the welfare, the preservation of our country should impel us to scatter broadcast the seeds of knowledge. If we could keep men's hands away from the ballot-box, we might, with comparative safety neglect their education and elevation. But as we cannot do this, neglect on our part is suicide. It will not answer for us to turn away in contempt and disgust from the ignorance and superstitious conceits of any of our people. This same ignorance and superstition will make themselves felt at the ballot-box, and will there, if nowhere else, show that they are not to be despised. Popular education, a wide dissemination of the elements of knowledge, and a pure Christianity are our only salvation.

The intensity of party feeling in the country, cannot be looked upon by the wise patriot, without some apprehension. That our citizens should feel a deep interest in the way our government is administered, and should earnestly desire the adoption of what each one judges to be the wisest system of national policy, is most natural, not to say a most desirable state of things. Patriotism herself, will naturally watch, with a jealous eye, the helm of the national ship, and the hand that is set to guide it. And so long as there continues to be diversity of opinion upon questions of public policy, we must expect political parties. This necessity is, in itself, perhaps not an evil. If there be honest differences of opinion, it is natural and proper for those who agree in opinion, to organize for the purpose of giving concentration to their efforts. But when

these party organizations are perverted and made to subserve base and selfish ends, they furnish just occasion for anxiety and alarm. When politicians set party advancement above every thing else—when they resolve on the triumph of their party, by fair means or foul—triumph at all hazards—then it is time to sound a note of alarm. Patriotism, we fear, is well-nigh swallowed up among us in the spirit of party. Party organizations tyrannize over individual independence. In their suffrages, men throw off individual responsibility, and suffer themselves to be the mere make-weights of their party. Having chained themselves to the car of their party, they are content to be dragged through whatever moral sloughs party ascendancy may seem to demand. The practical motto among many of our politicians, seems to have become “party first—country afterwards.” Politics has become a game—a system of adroit wire-pulling. The hope of office stimulates to zeal in party service. Loaves and fishes are the expected rewards of victory, and the sharper the appetite, the more untiring the efforts. Love of filthy lucre takes the place of patriotism. The Chief Magistrate’s parlor is thronged by hungry office-seekers. The White House has become a kind of party crib, whence the faithful, and they only, are to be served; for what have political heretics to do with the government of the country? The sessions of our Congress have come to be spent in President making, in mere party scrambles for the possession of the public granary, each party being on the alert to catch an opportunity for circumventing their opponents. Their action upon a given question is shaped for effect upon an approaching election. In our elections, bare-faced bribery and corruption are resorted to, when intrigue and stratagem prove ineffectual. The doctrine that “all is fair in politics,” is the practical creed of many of our would-be statesmen. In these ways politics is both a symptom and a cause of wide-spread demoralization among our people. Organizations whose professed design is to advance the nation to the climax of prosperity, become mighty engines of selfishness, and all manner of iniquity. The morals of our nation are thus corrupted, and the seeds of our national decay thickly sown.

A black cloud at the South darkens our political horizon. No patriot can help feeling apprehension, as he looks at *our slavery*. It is a blighting curse, and a moral mildew upon our nation. I do not now refer so much to the gross injustice of the system, its trampling in the dust the natural rights of men, and its degrading influence upon its unhappy victims, as to its demoralizing effects upon the society where it exists, and upon the nation’s morality.

Need I employ argument on this point? The state of public morals through the wide section of territory where it exists, is a living, speaking witness on the subject. It is a land where labor instead of being honored, as it ever should be, is become a mark of degradation. It is slavery, in its enervating effects upon society there, that makes a man ashamed to show a hard hand and a brawny muscle. It is in sections where slavery has exerted its baleful influence, that a negro attendant, lily fingers, and a smelling-bottle, are essential qualifications of a true gentleman. A land of slavery is, almost by a moral necessity, a land of pocket-pistols and bowie-knives, and blood-hounds. Our slavery is a moral ulcer upon our body politic. It is producing rottenness in our national fabric. It is a worm at the vitals of national morality, and its legitimate influence is to work national decline. It sends up a pestiferous effluvia over the whole land, blighting and withering every green thing. The cries of its down-trodden victims, are ascending to a God of justice, and we may be sure they will not ascend in vain.

Intemperance also is a foe that selects for its victims some of the noblest and most gifted minds in the land, those that the nation can ill afford to lose, and converts them into brutes. It annually sweeps its tens of thousands to a drunkard's grave, and consigns them to a drunkard's doom. Its direct and immediate effect is upon the victim and his family. Its more indirect but equally disastrous effects are upon society and the nation. It drinks up the life-blood of a republic, is the parent of pauperism and crime, and poisons the moral atmosphere. I single out intemperance from a brood of kindred vices, and particularly name it in the catalogue of things to excite solicitude, because you so well know its bitter fruits.

It would be easy, were it necessary, to show how profanity and a desecration of the Sabbath, to the extent that they prevail, are symptoms of political danger. They betray a lack of that moral principle which is our only safeguard. When men reach such a pitch of wickedness that they can unblushingly trifle with the holy name and appointments of their Maker, they are unsafe members of the body politic. There can be no national stability where there is moral rottenness. When men despise moral restraint, and laugh at the commands of their Maker, there is no enormity which their imagined self-interest will not lead them to perpetrate. You cannot know what they will do—*nor what they will not do*. The past history of France ought to instruct us on this point. For is French immorality any more dangerous to the state than American immorality? Do not moral causes work their effects on this side of

the ocean as well as on that? It is true, we have hitherto kept the waters of anarchy dammed up. In this, we have the advantage of France. But moral profligacy, here as well as there, if suffered to accumulate, will eventually burst its own sluice-way.

I might, if it were needful, extend the catalogue of things that are harbingers of evil to our republic. But my object will have been gained, if I have succeeded in convincing you that our national sky is not unclouded.

In conclusion, let the thought abide on our minds, that our virtues are our only national bulwark. The boasted perfections of our constitution, and the equity and wisdom of our laws, may be fit enough themes for fourth-of-July panegyric, but they can *govern* us no longer than we are willing to be governed by them. There is a power abroad in the land, which is above all constitutions and statutes; and that power is the will and spirit of the people. Whatever influences affect the moral character of the body of our citizens, are swaying the destiny of the nation. And if the time shall ever come when the mass of our population shall become corrupted and vicious, and shall throw off the restraints of morality, and set the law of God at defiance, then *know* that the day of our downfall is at hand.

If righteousness prevail, we shall, with the blessing of God, be exalted among the nations. If our land become a mountain of holiness, and a habitation of righteousness, then the God of our Fathers will continue to be our God, and our Protector. But if we forsake him, he will surely forsake us. "For the nation and kingdom that will not serve him shall perish, yea it shall be utterly wasted."